

*Bayek, many years before Origins...*

My father was the man who had defeated the tomb-robber Menna. Only the gods knew how much I'd had that particular fact drummed into me. By everyone in the village. Constantly.

Who was Menna? Good question. Some said that there was no such man; that 'Menna' was in fact several people, or simply the name of a highly organized gang of men who maintained the illusion of a sinister figurehead in order to spread fear.

Others said that Menna was indeed a living, breathing, flesh-and-blood person, but not in fact an active member of his own gang. They said he was a man grown fat and rich from the work of his minions and that he controlled his operation without once leaving the courtyards of his palatial home in Alexandria.

The most persistent rumour, and the one we talked of most on the streets of Siwa growing up, was that Menna was real, and that he ruled over his gang with a potent mix of fear and the promise of great riches in store. They said his teeth were taken from his victims, wired together, painted black and sharpened, and that they performed their job of inspiring fear in all who set eyes upon him admirably; that he was cruel and ruthless and worshipped no god but money. They said he would kill those he could not bribe and anyone who defied him – he would kill them and he would kill their families and hang their entrails in trees and their skinned corpses in public squares as a warning to those who defied him.

They said he was a demon, sent by the gods to punish the wicked, torment the innocent.

That's how evil he was.

Whatever the truth, Menna and his gang had stayed several steps ahead of the soldiers who were constantly in pursuit. Every now and then one of his men would be captured, tortured and burned alive in retribution, so that his body would be denied the journey into the afterlife, desecrated, just as he himself had desecrated so many burial grounds.

Not that it stopped them. The one unbribable official who had attempted to do so had failed, and then soon mysteriously died. No amount of intervention suppressed Menna's activities, and despite the torture visited upon his cohorts, none had ever revealed his identity or whereabouts. Everyone feared him.

I was much smaller, perhaps just ten years old, when Menna and his men were most active. When I first became aware of them they were little more than a story, a fable. They existed purely as a topic of conversation between my mother and father, and thus in my imagination late at night, when I lay in bed trying to sleep.

What I learned was that the gang had been moving throughout the north. They had been raiding pyramids, of course, but also casting their net wider. It was thanks to tomb-robbers like Menna that the pharaohs' architects had begun added more traps and dead ends to their burial sites, which were like a burning beacon to those who made a living stealing possessions that the dead planned to take to the afterlife. Even the rich who were now buried in huge secret vaults, tombs built into rock, were not safe from his depredations. But his favourite targets were those less wealthy yet not poor, who would begin their passage to the next life in a necropolis, a burial ground situated close to a settlement. It was upon these that Menna preyed.

He had a method. Posing as traders, his gang would set up camp within striking distance of his target, but not too close. From there they would go to work infiltrating the local community and bribing officials, as well as surveying tombs, taking note of their tunnels and working on ways to avoid any traps that had been set.

His methods would change depending on the nature of the burial ground, but he was in the habit of breaking into tombs and simply taking everything away. That way, the thieves could just disappear quickly, and sort out the gold from the gimcrack later, in the safety of their lairs.

All of which, of course, had brought him to the attention of my father, who, as Siwa's protector – the town *mekety* – had made it his business to know when Menna and his gang were close.

And at that particular time, they were very close.

Rabiah wasn't home. I took a seat at the front of her house and settled down to wait, resenting every passing second, until at last I caught sight of her, ambling slowly up the path towards home with a basket of fruit from the market.

'I wondered if I might see you today,' she said, moving past with little in the way of warmth or greeting. I followed her inside without being asked, waiting as she cast off her cloak and set down her basket, and then submitting to her as she stood with her arms folded, appraising me for an uncomfortably long time.

A little older than my mother, Rabiah was nevertheless similar in temperament: neither was the type to mince their words ('I'm *direct*, and there's nothing wrong in that,' my mother used to say whenever my father chided her for plain-speaking) and they both had a habit of making you feel as though they could see right through you.

And right now, that was exactly how I felt.

'I see determination,' she said, when at last the inspection was over. 'That's good. That's what we like to see from the blood of the Siwa protector. Perhaps you hope to take up the mantle presently, do you, now that your father's gone?'

'Perhaps,' I said carefully, wondering what she was leading to.

'How close were you to doing so, do you think?' she asked. Her face was unreadable, eyes slightly hooded.

'I have learned a great deal from him – about the art of survival and combat.'

'Survival,' she said. 'Didn't you learn that from the Nubian?'

The Nubians had been camped on the outskirts of the township when I was younger. I'd been friends with a girl, Khensa, who, despite being younger than me, had taught me much about hunting and trapping. Later

I discovered that Khensa had taught me these things at the behest of my mother, who considered the Nubians to be the very best in such matters.

'Yes,' I told Rabiah now. 'But when the Nubians left was when my father took over my training himself. Only he could tutor me in the ways of combat and protectorship.'

'Of course,' agreed Rabiah. 'And how has your training progressed?'

She fixed her gaze on me, and I felt as if she were able to see inside my head and read my thoughts, because it was true that for some reason my training had proceeded slowly, my father seemingly reluctant at every turn. Rabiah and my mother pushed and pushed for him to train me, yet each step was preceded by some variation of 'You're not ready yet, Bayek.'

Yes, I was aware that my training would take years – 'a lifetime, Bayek' was something else I heard a great deal – but even so: it felt to me as though from the age of six, when my training began, until now, at fifteen, I had made barely any progress at all.

And now it seemed Rabiah thought the same. 'Tell me,' she said, 'do you think that your training should have progressed further than it has?'

My head dropped. 'Yes,' I admitted.

'Quite,' she said, smiling. 'And why do you suppose your father hasn't taken you the full way? Why is your training so far from completion? Tell me, what do you remember of the night Menna struck?'

'So it is something to do with Menna?'

'My question first. What do you remember of that night?'

I looked at her. I had been only around six years old, but I still remembered every moment.

The night of the intrusion was still. A quiet night. I'd been lying in bed straining to overhear my parents talk. My father had been informed of unfamiliar faces appearing in town. Merchants, they said they were, but they traded precious little. He believed that these new faces were affiliated to the tomb-robbers, and that they'd set up camp somewhere in the desert outside the township, as was Menna's usual practice.

To me, such information was priceless. With the rumours of Menna's coming I was suddenly in great demand, my friends Hepzefa and Senefer

badgering me for information on a daily basis: was it true that Menna planned to march on Siwa with an army of tomb robbers? Was it true that the points of his sharpened teeth were tipped with poison? I enjoyed the attention. Being the protector's son certainly had its advantages.

Even so, mine was a fitful sleep. In my dream I stood before rocks, looking into a cave, and inside I saw eyes gleaming, a flash of white teeth in the oppressive dark. A rat. And then another. And another. As I watched, the cave seemed to fill with a heaving, writhing oily mass of bodies. They crawled on top of one another, each one trying to rise to the top of the pile, the shape of them shifting and bulging, more and more eyes appearing in the darkness. The noise of them, that scratching, scuffling sound, seeming to increase in intensity until . . .

I was waking. Only the noise of the rats did not disappear along with my dream. The noise was in the room with me.

It came from the window.

Now I jerked upright in bed. There was something out there, and at first I thought it might be a rat or . . . no, too big for a rat. Maybe a dog.

Then again, no. A dog didn't sound this way. A dog wasn't stealthy.

There was somebody out there. My eyes went to the screen at my bedroom window, and at first I thought it was moving in a breeze, but then I saw fingers. Knuckles. A hand carefully feeling its way inside.

Now I saw the face and upper body of a man as he eased himself through the aperture and into my room. His eyes gleamed evilly and between his teeth was a curved knife.

I scrambled out of bed as he drew himself up, and though my instinct was to run, and my brain was screaming at my legs to move, I couldn't make it happen, couldn't do *anything* – move, scream, shout, anything – and what prevented me from doing anything was fear.

The intruder had one crooked eye, wore a dark, dirty tunic and a striped cloak that reached down almost to the ground, flapping slightly in the breeze from the window. When he took the knife from between his teeth, he was grinning, but instead of the sharpened black wooden teeth I expected to see, his were normal – broken and dirty, but nothing like the deadly weapons my friends and I talked of in the streets of Siwa.

He put a finger to his lips to hush me, and still I wanted to run but my feet wouldn't move, and I stood rooted to the spot as he took a step into the room towards me, light dancing on the blade he held, the knife moving toward me, entrancing and hypnotizing me just as though it were a swaying, hooded cobra.

I opened my mouth. Or, to be more precise, I felt my mouth open, and knew I had taken a first important step, my mind telling me that if I could do that then surely I could force a scream.

If I could just overcome my fear.

He took another step closer. Finger still at his lips. From outside I heard the whispers and muffled footfalls of more men arriving and I thought of my mother and father asleep in the other rooms and I knew the danger they were in.

And now, at last, I felt the scream bubbling up reaching my mouth, about to escape from my lips.

When from behind me came my father's shout as he entered my room. 'I see!' he bellowed, 'So your master sought to silence me.'

The effect was instantaneous. The intruder reared back, the grin slipping from his face as he shouted, 'Strike!' and darted forward at the same time.

I turned and saw a second man appear in the doorway behind my father. 'Papa!' I called, and my father swung, meeting the new intruder with his sword, drawing first blood, a twist of the wrist proving fatal for his attacker. He dropped to one knee and span back to face front, blade arcing to parry an attack from the first intruder. Still rooted to the spot, I felt warm droplets of blood spatter my face.

My father was too quick for the crooked-eyed intruder, who took two quick steps back, the element of surprise lost, his knife a pathetic weapon against my father's sword. At the same time my father reached for me, grabbing me by the upper arm and yanking me towards the door, where I stumbled and fell over the body of the second attacker.

From the house behind me my mother yelled, 'Sabu!' and my father turned, hauling to me to my feet and pulling me into the house with him.

There, among the cushions and stools, was Mother, a blood-dripping bread knife in her hand, a dark, dangerous look in her eye and a body at her feet.

In the room was another man. A fourth was bustling through the door, armed, his teeth bared for attack. My mother called for me and I ran to her at the same time as Father surged forward to meet the two intruders – 'Ahmose, get Bayek to safety,' he cried, his sword swinging underhand.

In the next second one of the pair screamed and fell, his insides already spilling from his open stomach; the other yelled a curse and there was a ring of steel as their swords met. As my mother dragged me towards the bedroom, I saw my father duck and whirl, his sword held two-handed to meet two more invaders as they crowded into our house. The blade slashed, droplets of airborne blood in its wake. He wore an expression of almost serene concentration and, for a moment, even though we were besieged by killers, I had never felt safer or more protected.

The feeling evaporated. As Mother and I burst into the bedroom we found another intruder pulling himself to his feet, having climbed through the window. 'Easy pickings,' he said, grinning and bringing his blade to bear, but they were his last words, because my mother had taken two decisive steps forward and rammed the bread knife into his sternum before he had even brought his own blade to bear.

'He was right,' she said as he fell, and then pointed to the sleeping mat. 'Stay there,' she commanded, before raising her knife and flattening her back to the wall beside the window, twisting her neck to check outside. Satisfied nobody was there, she moved swiftly to the door, a contrast of bloodstained knife and elegant skirts that swished the floor.

There came a movement, a shifting shadow, and she raised the knife ready to defend herself again, only to relax at the sight of my father. His shoulders were heaving and he was bloody and drawn from battle, but he was alive. Outside in the dim light of our front room, I could see irregular shapes on the floor: the bodies of men who had fallen under my father's sword.

'Are you all right?' said Mother, going to him, pawing at his tunic to peer beneath the bloodstained fabric for wounds.

'I'm fine,' he said. 'And you? Bayek?' He looked meaningfully over her shoulder, at the corpse sprawled in their bedroom.

'We're fine,' she told him.

He nodded. 'Then I'm sorry, but I've got to go,' he said. 'They will be striking at the temple hoping for relics, gold, offerings – whatever they can get their filthy hands on. They fear no gods; they don't care if they offend the Oracle. It's up to me to stop them.'

'Will there be many?' she asked.

'Labourers mostly, the craftsman he uses. The soldiers were sent here to deal with me. They expect me to be dead by now.'

With a warning to be on our guard, he left, and in the sudden quiet of our house – a house now seemingly littered with bodies – my mother sank against the wall and lowered her head. She rubbed her hands together as though washing, and I realized that she was trembling in the aftermath of combat, but aware that more men might come; that she might have to fight again.

I thought of her stepping to the intruder and stabbing him – unhesitating, unwavering. For the first time that night I'd seen my parents spill blood. But while there was a sense that I'd been watching Father do his job and do it well – that keen sense of being protected I'd felt would stay with me – my mother seemed changed by it, as though ever aware of what lengths she would go to, to protect herself and her family. Over the years I would often see her studying her own hands, pensive yet oddly serene, and wonder if she was thinking back to that night.

Right then, though, I went to sit beside her. And in the moments before she roused herself and went to tell others what was happening, we comforted one another on the floor.

I ended my story, numb with the memory of it.